



SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Mr. Solomon Pratt began a new life, after a long and eventful career, in a small town in New York. He was a man of many talents, and his life was a story of adventure and discovery. He was a man of many talents, and his life was a story of adventure and discovery.

CHAPTER II.—Sol Pratt was engaged as a cook and the party decided to spend the winter in the North. He was a man of many talents, and his life was a story of adventure and discovery.

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Poor little shaver! It's when I see how some folks treat children that I get to thinking I could make a better world than this is.

"Going to run away again?" I asked, after a minute.

"No," he said. "Not while I'm down here. Miss Agony cries over me and I'd rather be licked any time than that."

Hartley rumbled the youngster's hair with his fingers.

"Sol," he says, "there's good here if you can get at it. Too much good to be running to waste. Ah, hum! Must be rather pleasant to have one or two of your own; must make life almost worth living. That's where you and I have missed it."

"You've got plenty of time yet," says I. "Maybe you'll be down in these diggings nine or ten years from now with a family of your own."

He smiled, kind of sad and one-sided. Then he got up and walked out to the piazza. Reddy hung around a spell, long enough to ask a couple million questions. Then he went into the parlor with the rest of the young luns.

Pretty soon I heard some one speak. I looked through the doorway and saw the Page girl coming up the porch steps alone. Hartley stood up and lifted his cap.

"Where's Van?" he asked.

"He's down on the beach with Margaret. I came back to look after the children."

"They're all right," says Martin. "Playing games in the front room."

Agnes stopped for a second in the doorway. "I don't just understand," she said, hesitating, "why you are here. Is it true that your health is bad?"

"No," he said, with a little laugh. "I did feel rather gone to sleep before I left town, but now I'm having the time of my life."

"Indeed," says she. "So far from Wall street?" I'm surprised.

He didn't seem to answer—least ways I didn't hear him. Next thing I knew he was standing on the top step.

"Please excuse me," he says, pretty frosty. "I must speak to James."

He went off down the steps and out of sight. She stood and watched him a minute, and I thought she looked puzzled—and solemn. Then she went into the parlor.

We had dinner out doors on the piazza. While it was going on the grown-ups didn't do much talking. It's precious little fun trying to talk against a typhoon and an earthquake mixed, and that's what them Fresh Air young ones turned that meal into.

"Two 'Hurrah boys' stand from under!" from the beginning. When I wasn't filling up fish plates I was doing potato skins and similar bouquets. They didn't fire 'em at me, you understand, but it's always the feller

looking on at the row who gets hit. Reddy was cap'n of the gun crew. He could chuck a potato skin with his left hand and eat with his right and look pious and shocked all at the same time.

When the juniors were filled up—and it wasn't so slouch of a job to get 'em filled—they went off to start a riot somewhere else and the Twins and the girls had a chance. Van got to talking about Scudder's presents, and he was funny as usual. That Margaret Talford would laugh until I had to join in just out of sympathy, even though I was up to my eyes in soup and potatoes and dishwashing. She was a jolly girl, that one; pretty and full of snap and go.

Nothing would do but them "presents" must go on exhibition. So Van logged 'em down from James' room and lined 'em up on the piazza for inspection. He took a stick for a pointer and gave a lecture about 'em, same as if they was a panorama, pointing out what he called the "feeling" and "atmosphere" of the shell basket and the "perspective" of Marcellus in the crayon enlargement. He had a good time and so did everybody else, especially Miss Talford.

By and by she clapped her hands. "Oh!" she says, "I've got an idea. Did you say your man was going to leave you, Mr. Van Brunt?"

Van heaved a sigh. "Yes," he says. "I believe he is. I fear that James hasn't the artistic temperament. I certainly looked as if he had it; he was sad and soulful and—dyspeptic. But no; even the 'Motherless Home' didn't appeal to him. He says he's going to-night."

"I wonder if he would come over to the school?" says she. "We need a man there, don't we, Agnes? To help about the place and look out for the boys, and to—well, to protect us."

"Lucky James!" says Van. "But why James? Won't Martin here do—or—excuse my blushes—myself?"

But the Talford girl laughed and said he wouldn't do at all. He lacked dignity, she said, and didn't look the part. She asked Miss Page if she really didn't think that James would be just the man for them. Agnes said perhaps he would. So the four of 'em went away for a walk on the beach and to talk it over.

I'll bet I called that valet anyway but a church member and a good fellow a dozen times over while I was diving into them dishes. I washed and washed till, seemed to me, I was soaked out fresh enough to bile, like a pickled codfish. And when the washing was done there was the wiping. I laid out a bale or so of dish towels and pitched in.

Pretty soon somebody says: "Mayn't I help?"

I swung around and there was Agnes Page. Nice to look at, she was, too.

"Can't I help you, please?" says she, picking up a towel.

"Land sakes, no!" says I. "You'll spoil your fine clothes. Besides I've got sort of used to it by this time; my arm goes round of itself, like a paddle wheel."

She laughed and grabbed a chowder plate and commenced to wipe. She done fairly well for anybody who hadn't practiced much, but she never would have won the cup for speed. One dish every five minutes is all right, maybe. But I wonder, I judged her, she'd hired help to home. I wondered what she'd done with Hartley.

By and by she says: "Mr. Pratt, how long do you expect to stay here?"

"Here?" says I. "On Horsefoot—on

Ozone Island? Land knows. Long's the Heavens—that is, long's Mr. Van Brunt and Mr. Hartley stay here. I guess. It's a restful place, ain't it?" says I, reaching for the next stack of dishes.

She smiled. "No doubt they find it so," she says. "How do you like the Natural Life?"

"Who—me?" Oh, I calculate I shall like it tip-top when I get a little more used to it—that is, if I last. I was oldest boy in a family of nine, and dad died young, so I was brought up Natural, as you might say. It's been some time, though, since I had so many hours of straight-ahead, pitch-and-hustle Naturalness in the day's run; been getting artificial and lazy of late years, I guess. But I'm tough, and I'll be all right and used to it pretty soon—getting lots of practice. By the way," I says, "who was it that sent 'em here?"

"Who?" says she, looking surprised. "Sent? I don't understand."

"Was Mr. Van Brunt and his chum sent here by the doctor, or who?"

"Why, I didn't know they were sent at all. I think they came here of their own accord."

"Humph!" says I, considering. "Was any of their folks ever took this way? Does it run in the families?"

That seemed to tickle her and I guess she understood what I meant. But she didn't answer the question; went on dry-polishing the pickle dish. Then she says, kind of accidental on purpose:

"Is Mr. Hartley's health improving?"

"Oh, yes!" says I. "He's picking up some, specially in his appetite. He ain't up to Van Brunt in that line yet, though. Van eats for three; Hartley's only up to the one-man-and-a-boy mark so far. He'd do better if he didn't have them blue streaks of his. Seems to have something on his mind."

"Perhaps he's troubled about leaving his business," she suggests, looking sideways at the pickle dish.

"Guess not," says I, looking sideways at her. "I don't think I've heard him mention business since he's been down. No, I ain't that, according to my notion. He ain't in love, is he?"

She looked at me then pretty hard; but I was as wooden-faced as a cigar sign.

"Dear me, no," she laughs, brisk. "I guess not. What made you think that?"

"Oh, nothing," says I. "I ain't ever been took that way myself, but it seemed to me he had all the symptoms. Didn't know but he was fretting about some young woman. He's a fine chap, that young Hartley. It'll be a lucky girl that gets him."

She didn't say much more, but she looked at me every once in a while as if she was wondering. I never let on. I was as innocent and easy as the cat with the cream on its whiskers. I had a sneaking hope that I might have boosted Hartley a little mite, and I felt good down one side. Then I thought of Van, and I felt mean all up the other.

After a spell the Twins and Miss Talford happened along, and what a time Van Brunt made when he saw his girl helping me wipe dishes.

"Well, well!" he says. "Is this the way you hurry back to see what the dear children are doing? Sol, you old fascinator, how do you do it? Martin and I fell in love with him at first sight, Miss Talford, and now look at Agnes."

"Hold on there," says I. "Don't spread it too thick. I ain't got but one hat that'll do for Sunday, and I want that to fit me. I was giving Miss Page a few lessons in housekeeping, and you'd ought to thank me for that, Mr. Van Brunt."

It seems the Talford girl had seen James and he had agreed to go to Eastwick with 'em. "Was a good chance for him, a soft job and all that. Truth to tell, I guess he was kind of sorry about parting from Van altogether, the gleaming might not be so good in his next best berry pasture."

So about six o'clock Scudder came with his dory and the picnic broke up. The Fresh Airers were pretty high played out by this time. The smaller children was nodding with their heads on the shoulders of the bigger ones, and I even had to tote two of the littlest in my arms down to the beach. But they was all full fed and sun-burned and dirty and happy, and they'd had the bluest time in their poor, pinched-up little lives.

"Well, good-by, Andrew Jackson," says I to Reddy. "Had good time enough to want to come again, have you?"

"Sure thing," says he. "Like it as well here as you do over at the school!"

"Yup," he says. "Ain't nobody to plug potato skins at over there."

He was a smart little coot. Had the makings of a man in him if you dug down far enough to get at it.

Lord James comes down to the shore tugging his trunk behind him.

"So long, Hopper," says I. "Shall I give your love to Marcellus' spook if it comes gliding again?"

He looked at me very solemn. "You'd better come too," he says. "You take my advice and leave this blooming island now while you've the chance. There'll come a time," says he, "when you won't 'ave it."

He climbed into the dory and set down all huddled up in the stern with his trunk between his knees. Scudder began rowing and they moved off.

"There," says Van, referring to his lordship, "once the final tie that binds us to a world past. Shall we sing 'The Last Link Is Broken,' Martin? Or have you something more appropriate to suggest, skipper?"

"I have for myself," says I. "It's 'Work for the Night Is Coming.'"

And I hurried up to the house to get supper.

CHAPTER X.

The Voyage of the Ark. The Heavens were late down to breakfast next morning, owing, I calculate, to the loss of Lord James. I could hear 'em hailing each other, asking: 'What's become of my gold stocking?' and the like of that. Trouble seemed to be that they had too many clothes. If they'd been limited to one suit for Sunday and a pair of overalls to cover up the ruins the rest of the week, like I was, they'd have got along better.

But they was rigged at last and at breakfast was chipped as a pair of mackerel gulls. They commenced to talk garran. Consarn 'em, I hoped they'd forgot that.

"The loan business is all right, Sol," says Van. "Scudder will bring us loan at three dollars a boat load. He says I'll take about 15 boat loads."

"He does, hey?" says I. "At three dollars per? That's generous of him. Anything else?"

"Yes. He is to continue to bring us milk. We have decided that perhaps for the present we had better not keep a cow."

Small favors thankfully received. I was glad that milking wasn't going to be added to the general joyfulness.

"I think that's a nice, far-sighted decision," says I. "Unless you could learn your cow to eat seaweed, I don't see—"

"Oh, Scudder could bring us hay," says Van. "And we could give the animal the spare vegetables from the garden."

"Would be a long time between meals for the poor critter, I'm afraid," says I. "How much is Nate charging for the milk?"

"Nine cents a quart. That's the only one cent more than you have to pay in New York, and when you consider how far he has to bring it, I call it dirt cheap."

"Well, 'twas about as cheap as the garden dirt, but I didn't say nothing."

"We're going to raise chickens, too," says Hartley. "Scudder, so Van says, will sell us live Plymouth Rocks at 30 cents a pound. Skipper, you might fix up the poultry yard in your spare time."

In my "spare" time. There was a joke in that, but it wasn't so intended. Then Van Brunt began to preach "pig." Seems Nate had told him that the one thing needful to turn Ozone Island into a genuine Natural Life was a pig, and of course he, Nate, had the only pig in creation that was worth buying.

"He showed it to me the other morning," says Van. "The prettiest little black and white fellow you ever saw, Martin. Miss Talford saw him yesterday before she came over, and she said he was a dear. You might be repairing a sty for him in your odd moments, Sol."

My odd moments and my even ones, too, was pretty well filled up for the next few days. The Heavens loaded and superintended and smoked and fished and ate. All I had to do was to turn out with the gulls, and cook breakfast, and clear away, and wash dishes, and build hay yards, and fix up a leaky pig pen, and get ready them blessed gardens, and sweep and dust, and dig clams, and make beds, and get dinner, and sail a boat, and chop wood, and bundle up washing for Nate to take to Huldry Ann, and scour knives, and—well, there was plenty more. Seven or eight hundred odd jobs have slipped my memory.

The gardens was ready for planting on a Wednesday. Nate fetched over the last dory load of loam the night afore and I spread it afore I got supper. The chickens and the hog was to come on Thursday. I was to take the skiff and go after 'em. Nate being engaged to cart a carry-all load of boards to Ostabie. Huldry Ann was to have the live stock at the shore ready for me.

"How's the menagerie coming, Nate?" I asked. "In cages or on the hoof?"

"Oh, I'll box 'em for you, Sol," he says. "The hens in one box and the pig in another. The pigs pretty thin—I mean young, so he won't be no left to you."

Wednesday morning the Heavenly gardening begun. One patch for Van Brunt and the other for Hartley. They had seeds by the peck, more or less, brought over by Scudder's express and charged for at undertaker's prices.

The Twins started in with a vengeance. I showed 'em how. For once I was superintending and the job suited me fine—nothing would have tickled me more, unless 'twas to turn in and take a nap.

Van takes one hoe and Hartley the other. Each of 'em was actually round-shouldered from the weight of the seeds in their pockets. They had cucumber seeds, and melon seeds, and land knows what. Wonder to me was they didn't try oranges and pineapples. And in the middle of July!

"Now, Martin," says Van. "Here goes! Bet you fifty I get the first cucumber."

"I'll go you," says Martin, shucking his jacket. "Sol, what do I do next?"

I showed him. I started 'em even on cucumber beds. They hoed like they went by steam. You never see such ambitious farmers in your life as they was—just then.

"Kind of hard work, ain't it?" says I, watching their front hair get damp and stick to their foreheads.

"Work?" says Van. "This is recreation, man!"

"All right," I says. "Heave ahead and recreate. I've got to work, myself."

So I went in and swept out the dining room. Once in a while, through the open window, I'd get a sight of 'em laying into the cucumber beds, with the sun blazing down. I grinned. When the boots been on one leg too long it's kind of nice to see somebody else's corns get pinched.

When they come in to dinner they was just slopping over with joy. Gardening was more fun than a barrel of monkeys. But I noticed that when Van got up from the table he rick kind of "steady by jerks" as if he had kinks in his back, and Martin moved his shoulders slow and easy and said "Ouch!" under his breath when he reached too far.

They didn't seem to be in any real hurry to get back to work, either. Stayed on the porch, and smoked two cigars instead of one. I had to chuck out a hint about getting them seeds covered up quick afore they'd leave their chairs. Then they went, and I could see the hoos moving; but they moved slower.

They turned in right after supper, which was unusual. Next morning I didn't hear a word about gardens. The conversation was pretty limited and doleful, being separated with grunts and groans, so to speak. When Van Brunt dropped his napkin he hollered to me to come and pick it up, and

We Moved Off Stately and Slow, Like an Ocean Liner Leaving Her Dock.

according to contract, but setting in the sand with his hind legs tied together with string. He was whirling in circles with his tail for a pivot, so to speak, and he seemed to be mainly squeal. Little he was, and thin—peered to me to be thin as Nate's milk of human kindness—but the Heavens fell down and worshiped him like he was a hog angel.

"Humph!" says I. "Is that the 'dear'?"

"That's the dear," says Van, patting him at long distance.

Well, he weighed four pound and cost six dollars, so that's dear enough for anybody.

I loaded the critters into the skiff—the pig fairly squealing while I was doing it—and then the Twins climbed aboard.

"All right, skipper," says Van. "Shove off."

"Just a minute," says I. "What am I going to do—take the next train? This transport seems to be pretty well loaded."

It was. Van Brunt was on the amidships thwart. Hartley was up in the bow, with the pig between his knees. The chicken coop was piled in the stern. I ain't no dimes show dwarf, and where I was going to stow myself was too much for me.

"Humph!" says Van. "It does look standing room only. Here, skipper; you kneel on the back seat. I'll row. I didn't expect kneel, but I straddled across the stern somehow, with the butt end of the hen roost in my lap and my feet over each rail just clear of the water."

Nate's boy shoved us into deep water. He had to take off his shoes and stockings to do it, and he was laughing so that he made mighty poor head-way.

"You pecky young one!" says I, losing my patience. "If you don't tend to your job I'll get out and duck you. What are you giggling at?"

"I ain't giggling," says he. "I'm pushing 'tigh! Haul! Haul! Ugh! There you be!"

He gave us a final shove and then went back and rolled around in the bushes. Somebody was having a good time if we wasn't.

We moved off stately and slow, like an ocean liner leaving her dock. We didn't have any hand, but the pig and hens furnished muscle. The skiff's rail was almost awash and my heels dipped on every little wave.

Van rowed like a good one till he got about two-thirds of the way across. Then the tide got a grip on us and he commenced to go slower and groan. He'd miss a stroke and would swing half way around. We was going broadside on most of the time.

By and by Hartley spoke up. "What makes this pig kick so?" says he. "He's like 'twas some kind of a conundrum. The critter seemed to be doing his best to answer it, but his language wasn't understandable."

"You look out he don't kick that string off his legs," I hollers. "I had to holler to make myself heard above the choir."

He bent forward and looked down. "Why?" he says. "I'll be shot if he hasn't done it already."

"Hang on to him then!" I yells. "For the land snakes don't let him loose." Van Brunt gives a final groan and stops the oars.

"No use, skipper," he says. "My cucumber recreation has put me out of the race. I wouldn't row another stroke for the control of the Standard Oil. You'll have to be shoter the rest of the way."

I didn't know what a "shoter" was and I don't know now; but I could see trouble coming.

"Set where you be!" I shouted. "Don't move. Thunderation! There you go!"

The pecky idiot had stood up to stretch, leaving the oars in the rowlocks. Course the skiff swung broadside on and a wave knocked the starboard overboard. Hartley see it going and made a jump and a grab. He missed it, you might know, but he let go of the pig.

I ripped out a lively kind of speech and dove for the port oar. The hen coop was in my way and it me went headfirst into Van Brunt's shirt-front. When I got out of the mix-up both oars was ten yards astern, the pig was doing three laps a minute over us and under the thwarts and the hens was all out of jail and proud of it. Likewise we was drifting out to sea.

"Well!" says I. "This is nice, ain't it? Get out, you varmint!" This last part was to a pullet that was flapping on my shoulders.

Would you believe it, all them 'Heavens' looms done was to laugh. They just roared.

"Ho! ho!" whoppers Hartley. "Oh, dear me! This is worth the price of admission."